

# Amerindian and black women: 500 years of neglect

by

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**T**ouches of bright color in the Latin American landscape, their children wrapped in ponchos at their breasts or upon their backs, the women of the Aymara, Quiche, Maya, Quechue, Kuna, Mapuche, Salasaca, Guarani, Garifuna, and myriad other native cultures reside in the villages, mountains and jungles of America, bearers of a millennial culture that refuses to die despite assimilation, a process particularly evident among the younger generations.

Traditional clothing and native languages are strong ties to history, badges of identity they wear with pride. And these visible signs contrast markedly with the current "modernization" that has swept the continent without, it often appears, bringing them any direct benefits.

## **Colorful, but Invisible**

Despite the visible presence of indigenous and black women throughout the continent, we have insufficient knowledge about their lives. The earliest descriptions leave us with the impression that our ancestral mothers were largely ignored, except as an exotic or folkloric figure. Statistical information and research on the contemporary reality of indigenous and black



women is either non-existent or reduced to partial references within larger contexts. Health issues must often be extrapolated from the general picture, and are almost exclusively limited to reproductive factors, ignoring other aspects of equal importance.

But the presence of these racial and ethnic groups in Latin America is undeniable. Mexico, Ec-

cuador, Peru, Guatemala and Bolivia have high indigenous populations among their peasantry. (In Bolivia and Guatemala, indigenous people account for more than half the national population.) Brazil, Columbia, Venezuela, Panama and Paraguay have significant tribal populations. Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile and Argentina also have indigenous minority populations.

Along with its indigenous and mestizo populations, the Central American isthmus is also home to a black minority, found from Belize to Panama. In Honduras, blacks make up 4.1 percent of the population; in Costa Rica, 3.8 percent; in Nicaragua, 3.1 percent, and in Guatemala, 1 percent. In the Caribbean, many nations have predominantly black populations. In South America, Columbia, Venezuela and the Guyanas have large black populations. In Brazil, blacks number approximately 8 million.



### Voice of the past

Some 2,000 years ago, the women of this continent lived in agriculture-based matriarchal societies where the division of labor was based on the complementary nature of female and male tasks. As active farmers, women were the mainstay of economic production, not merely contributors. Women dominated such advanced technologies as weaving, metalwork and ceramics, giving them a prominent place in their communities, in addition to their role in reproduction and the transmission of cultural values.

In Andean culture and others, the prevailing concept of balance within the female-male duality was rooted in an indigenous world view that sees human beings coexisting in equilibrium with nature and other communities.

This way of life, however, began to disappear with the emergence of the Maya, Aztec and Inca empires, long before the Spanish conquest. Social stratification, the emergence of the State, and transition to a patriarchal order marked the beginning of the end of women's rights and the abrupt curtailment of their social roles. Women's lives became ever more restricted to the family circle and reproduction, and women's social predominance was gradually eclipsed.

In the Aztec culture, for example women were characterized by their devotion to the home, while men played a dynamic role outside it. And this indoctrination concerning gender roles began with one's entrance to the world.

### Exploitation

The Conquest shook profoundly the native population of America. The demographic changes that resulted -- including, in some cases, extinction of

certain ethnic-linguistic groups, especially in Central America -- reveal the violence of the colonization

process.

The Spanish conquest brought with it such previously unknown diseases as smallpox, measles, typhus, yellow fever and malaria, and these took an enormous toll in indigenous health and survival. Just as fatal were the mass killings, enslavement and inhuman treatment that characterized this period.

Indigenous women were doubly vulnerable to the onslaught. On the one hand, they were caught up in the forced labor, forced migration and slavery systems implemented by the conquerors. This seriously damaged the cohesion of their communities, bringing greater poverty, diminished resources, famine, and infant and maternal malnutrition.

Contact with Catholic Church missions was also disastrous. The roundups that herded indigenous people into custody resulted in widespread death, and the forms in which evangelization was imposed were often just as violent. Contact between the sexes was strictly regulated and monogamy imposed, without regard to native traditions. The mission's "charges" were denied the possibility of controlling their own lives, destroying the social structure of their cultures and communities.

Incorporated by force into exploitative regimes and raped -- in both literal and economic terms -- indigenous women (and, later, mestizo women and black slaves) worked without recompense in miserable conditions on plantations and haciendas. It will never be known, writes Luis Vitale in *Historia y sociología de la mujer latinoamericana*, the degree to which these women contributed to the economic development of the New World.

The gradual assimilation of indigenous communities into fledgling Latin American nations that eventually won their political independence only aggravated the indigenous and black women's deteriorated social condition. Structural changes in the prevailing economic systems sparked massive migrations. Indigenous men were often forced to abandon their communities in search of sustenance. As a consequence of male emigration, women inherited the head-of-household mantle, devising a variety of strategies to ameliorate poverty and ensure the survival of their families.

Many indigenous women have stayed in rural areas, in valleys and highlands, the Altiplano and the tropical forests, working in agriculture and integrated in their communities. Their survival, however, is increasingly threatened by the over-exploitation of natural resources. Others, particularly those belonging to communities that have lost their lands and resources, have been forced to migrate and sell their labor in conditions of misery.

### The Contemporary Debate

Today, as in the past, the fundamental demands of indigenous organizations focus on the end of historical domination and the restitution of the lost lands. To what degree do these demands involve women? Confronted by triple discrimination within national societies and their communities, do indigenous women share these demands, or do they place greater emphasis on feminist concerns? Is their attachment to traditional cultural values a result of educational and social isolation or a self-imposed defense mechanism?

Indigenous women appear to have postponed their gender-specific concerns for the more general de-



Photo by Vera Lentz

mands of their native communities. However, in countries like Mexico, Peru, Brazil and others, indigenous and black women have formed autonomous groups within their communities to ad-

vance gender demands in a parallel fashion.

Whatever their approach, indigenous women demand the restitution of expropriated lands and the end of the discrimination that has limited access to health, housing and educational services, with resulting high maternal and infant mortality rates, high fertility rates, elevated incidence of disease malnutrition, illiteracy, school dropout rates, etc.

And they raise their voices against the cultural violence that ignores the value of their own histories in order to impose other histories; against the political and physical violence that has pursued and exterminated their communities; and against the discrimination and isolation they have suffered for centuries.

At the same time, as women, they demand their rights within their own communities and a return to the egalitarian and complementary position they once held alongside men. Guardians of cultural traditions that refuse to die, they seek greater appreciation of this culture and greater forms of participation within national societies that have privileged men's participation over women's. They seek recognition of the specificity of their status as women, as members of racial and ethnic minorities and as workers.

The search for and re-encounter with their own identities requires both the liberation of their people and acknowledgment and appreciation of their gender.

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*Source: Women's Health Journal, 1/92. Isis Internacional, Casilla 2067, Correo Central, Santiago de Chile.*